

One

VISION

The most destructive force in the American West is its commanding views, because they foster the illusion that *we* command.

I am a westerner by choice, drawn to live here a quarter century ago by nothing so much as those views. The vistas are the antithesis of the claustrophobic forests of the upper Midwest, where I grew up. Like most newcomers, I was drawn first to the mountains, to the northern Rockies. The pristine peaks set in achingly blue sky and the vast wilderness areas stalked by cougars, wolves, and bears capture a man's imagination. Over the years, though, I found myself working down from the mountaintops toward the flat base. The eastern face of the Rockies, where the mountains abruptly and dramatically rise from the plains, is called "the Front Range."

I was drawn there by an illusion. It is the edge of the mountains, therefore the edge of wilderness, which is to say, of wildness. Sitting here facing east, everything behind me in the mountains is wild; everything in front is worked hard by farmers, cattle and sheep, oil men, miners, and railroaders. Elevated a bit by wild mountains, the sweep of plains fosters the illusion that here, sheltered and informed by wilderness, one can see all of the rest, all of the space stretching east to the Mississippi, not just in three dimensions, but in four, in time, in its history.

Once you know a bit of this history, you can imagine easily enough that you see below great herds of bison, Chief Joseph fleeing, Custer's arrogance corrected, Jim Hill's railroaders pounding spikes and felling timber for ties, steam tractors gang-plowing wheat land, cattle drives, and even the great cloud of dust that rose from this land in the Dirty Thirties to create our nation's most profound environmental catastrophe, the scars of which remain.

Where else can one do this? I sat on Appalachian and Adirondack mountainsides. But those vistas never allowed me to presume for a second that I knew a thing about conditions even a county away, so varied and inscrutable is the landscape. Yet again and again I have looked across the plains and believed I could literally see the conditions and history of everything east to the Mississippi, north to Alberta and Saskatchewan, south to Texas. I am a sucker for this illusion even now, when I understand how dangerous it is. The truth is, we do not know this landscape, not at all. Deceiving ourselves into believing we do is precisely why this land grows nothing so much as failure.



The northern Great Plains, no matter where they are viewed, are empty, becoming every year more vacant. People have made them what they are. Every single square inch of them is covered with evidence of human habitation and folly, and that's the point. To know a bit of this place's history is to know it is not an isolated, forgotten stretch of the human experience, "flyover country," as it is called by our nation's predominantly bicoastal population. The bedrock assumptions that shaped our nation played out and failed right here in the northern Great Plains. A harsh god of a landscape tested what we thought were our best ideas and found them wanting.

Obviously, the plains generated the western myth—the swaggering cowboy, the fast-gun vigilante, the boomer who is our entire nation's image worldwide today—but if you follow the human tracks far

enough here, you quickly discover a forgotten story. True, this was the hallowed ground of Manifest Destiny, the ultimate frontier of a frontier people, but it was also shaped by Theodore Roosevelt and especially by his young cousin Franklin, a couple of knickerbockers. More important, it shaped them and their pivotal ideas. This is the foundation landscape of progressivism as it evolved under Theodore Roosevelt. The Great Plains are also the home soil of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and the social welfare state that persists, especially in the red-state West. This will be one of the cases I make in this book, that the progressive zeal of the reformer is every bit as dangerous as the swagger of the cowboy, and, conversely, the "conservative" West is almost wholly a creature of the nation's most socialist of projects, the New Deal. Cowboy myth and New Deal alike were flawed by the illusion of omniscience, an illusion encouraged by the wide open spaces. Falling for this illusion is not without precedent.

The artist George Catlin made his way up the Missouri River in 1832 to Fort Union, an outpost at the confluence of the Yellowstone River in what is now Montana. He left us with fascinating drawings of Indian life but also letters describing the place. Among them is this:

It is generally supposed and familiarly said, that a man "falls" into a reverie; but I seated myself in the shade a few minutes since, resolved to *force* [emphasis his] myself into one; and for this purpose I laid open a small pocket-map of North America, and excluding my thoughts from every other object in the world, I soon succeeded in producing the desired illusion. This little chart, over which I bent, was seen in all its parts as nothing but the green and vivid reality. I was lifted up upon an imaginary pair of wings, which easily raised and held me floating in the open air, from whence I could behold beneath me the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans—the great cities of the East, and the mighty rivers. I could see the blue chain of the great lakes at the North—the Rocky Mountains, and beneath them and near their base, the vast, and almost boundless plains of grass, which were speckled with bands of grazing buffaloes!¹

Catlin witnessed the beginning of the end of the bison. Although the actual fact of their near extermination would not be accomplished for another fifty years, he could see it coming even then. The hide trade was flourishing all around him, meaning bison were rapidly being converted into robes, then all the rage in upscale eastern carriages. His solution to this was interesting, in that his idea came a full forty years before the creation of the nation's first national parks at Yellowstone and Yosemite, an idea then regarded as original and America's gift to the world. Here's what he envisioned from his god's-eye view:

And what a splendid contemplation too, when one (who has traveled these realms, and can duly appreciate them) imagines them as they *might* in the future be seen (by some protecting policy of government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a *magnificent park*, where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse, with sinewy bow, and shield and lance, amid the fleeting herds of elk and buffaloes. What a thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world in future ages! *A nation's Park*, containing man and beasts, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!²

A painter is a seer, as is a photographer. L. A. Huffman was both photographer and bison hunter in Montana in the 1880s. Most of the bison were then gone, but after a night huddled against a prairie blizzard with his horse, Crackers, he wrote:

When not busy melting snow in an army cup or toasting hard bread and bits of bacon over my tiny fire I talked to Crackers of my scheme to make a great pasture of the "Flat Iron" [the stretch of Montana between the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers, the very landscape that will be this book's focus] to fence it with a great woven wire to banish forever the skin hunters, maybe enlist them in an army of wardens. How and where the great park gates should be guarded, how tame wild things would get—bison, antelope and elk—and too, how splendid would be when the yellow-green carpet of spring had come, to see it all teeming with life.³



Technology has computerized the process of being “lifted up upon an imaginary pair of wings.” During the 1980s and ’90s, computer software known as “geographic information systems” revolutionized the field of geography and our understanding of the state of nature. This technology does essentially what Catlin imagined he did with his pocket map. Using both aerial and satellite imagery as well as infrared photos that highlight aspects such as vegetative cover and topography, stream flow and seasonal changes, the computers draw maps that are used to organize and locate data such as wildlife populations, human populations, archaeological sites, and ownership boundaries. A computerized GIS overlays information on space. It allows one to ask sophisticated layers of questions about the land, at almost any scale, from an acre to a continent. You can sit at the computer screen and quickly generate the convincing illusion that you can see it all, from Rockies to Mississippi, even know it all.

It is a terribly saddening exercise. I’ve seen it applied to landscapes ranging from coastal rain forests to deserts, from city-plagued estuaries to logged-off mountain peaks. All of these maps are sober and unflinching accounts of our thorough mistreatment of the land. Yet the exercise is most stunning when applied to the vast sweep of grassland that is the center band of our continent, part of the globe’s inventory of a biome known as temperate grasslands. (The other temperate grasslands occur largely across Eurasia in a belt below Siberia, in Australia, New Zealand, and the veldts of South Africa, and in South America in the pampas, which stretch east of the Andes through central Argentina.)

A scan of the North American stretch shows a negative, a record of absence. No passenger pigeons. No wild bison. Prairie dog colonies shrunk to the merest of dots. Black-footed ferrets down to, at the extreme, seven individuals. Swift foxes nearly gone. Same with prairie falcons and peregrines. Every watercourse dammed and drained.

Everything plowable plowed. That last circumstance is responsible for the extinctions. Temperate agriculture—by which we mean largely the production of corn, wheat, and beef—thrives only in temperate grasslands. That is why the above-mentioned inventory of the grasslands worldwide accounts for something like 90 percent of the world's agricultural exports.⁴

There is another absence to be recorded here, though: that of people. Cities aside, the population of the North American grassland peaked just after the end of World War I and has been in steady decline ever since. In contrast with that decline, the temperate grasslands, which are the world's breadbaskets, disproportionately bear the crushing burden of feeding the world's population. All other biomes—temperate and tropical rain forests, boreal forests, tundra, deserts, and such—are given some sort of protected status; that is, around 10 percent of their area is saved as parks and preserves in conditions that are close to the original, with wild native flora and fauna.⁵ Temperate grasslands are a glaring exception. Only 1 percent of them is so protected. Agriculture gets what it wants.

Yet we are now learning that this least protected of landscapes was likely to have produced the most wildlife in former times. Creatures favored these places for the very reason agriculture does. Native grassland systems produce enormous amounts of that palatable commodity, grass, and because ungulates eat grass, the prairie can host a food chain with one very hefty link, a link capable of supporting bison and elk by the millions as well as the magnificent top-end predators, such as grizzly bears, which are the planet's most threatened category of wild animals. We know of this productivity from the reports of the people who encountered it and presided over its liquidation during the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet as we increasingly value wildlife and become more sophisticated in its protection, we realize that by maintaining a few remnant wildlife populations in Rocky Mountain parks and wilderness areas, we are swimming against a swift cur-

rent. Elk, grizzlies, and wolves are plains animals, and we would get far greater results for our efforts by returning them to their habitat of choice.



All of these facts slowly built a case that in turn built a coalition of conservation groups in the American plains in the 1990s. The coalition included the usual suspects, such as Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club, and the World Wildlife Fund, as well as local groups. The logical and chosen path for these conservationists was to enlist the support of the computers of Bill Haskins. I've known Haskins for almost twenty years, encountering him first when I was an environmental reporter for the local newspaper in Missoula, Montana. He was then a radical, allying himself with the town's active Earth First group. It's not clear whether his beliefs have mellowed over the years, but his tactics certainly have changed. He is an expert in GIS technology and has a rack of equipment that is the heart of a nonprofit advocacy group. Haskins's software has worked its way through the Great Plains, repeating Catlin's conceit using more concrete methods.

He and a group of biologists and ecologists from a number of conservation groups were looking for some stars to align. They asked questions of the landscape: Where were the largest chunks of undisturbed prairie? Where were the best habitat, the most endangered species, the biggest chunks of public land? And, especially, where was ranching in the worst financial trouble? The last question is key to their work. Formally, the mapping led to a research publication called *Ocean of Grass*, but this was no ordinary academic exercise.⁶ It was an exercise in thinking big, simply because we have learned that conservation in this arid place must occur on an enormous scale.

The grassland has always been a landscape of motion. Its human inhabitants worldwide are largely nomads. Its big animals are migratory. Grasslands are grasslands because the aridity is further plagued

by periodic droughts, as well as severe blizzards, wind, and a gantlet of other brutal conditions. To survive all these, animals must be able to move to greener pastures, to protected coulees, to plateaus swept clean of snow by wind. All of this makes conservation of plains habitat and fauna a matter of large scale. A few hundred, even a few thousand, acres won't support wild bison, never mind the big predators that eat them. A viable plot for plains conservation is something on the order of four million acres.

The second element of the big thinking of Haskins and his colleagues involved a new idea in conservation that explains the economic questioning during their GIS mapping. As we shall see in detail as this story unwinds, the West is a welfare state built on public lands. A series of failed ideas and busted programs have left the landscape in a "checkerboard" condition. That is, square chunks of privately owned ranches are interspersed with even larger stretches of federal property, but the patchwork appears to be seamless in aerial views. That's because the federal land, virtually every square inch of it, is leased to those neighboring private ranches at well below market rates. Generally, the leases attach to the ranches as something very close to a property right, a matter that has been the chief vexation of western conservationists for generations.

The ranchers overgraze these federal lands, yet the laws give them almost complete freedom to do so, in the same way that a pre-Civil War plantation owner was free to beat and even kill his slaves. Someone, however, finally figured out that this vexation has presented an opportunity in disguise. If one were to become one of those ranchers, one would be as free to heal the land as the rancher historically was to abuse it. So what if we were to identify an area of, say, 3.5 million acres with a small amount of privately owned land and big chunks of federally leased grazing lands? And what if we were to buy all those private ranches? Conservationists would control the whole 3.5 million, to begin creating what Catlin called "a nation's park," what we will call "the American Prairie Reserve."



Map 1. The Great Plains. Courtesy of OnEarth magazine.

Map ahead of call to
keep within section.
Ok?
SMH/ICS

The *Ocean of Grass* study, with its god's-eye view, found ten spots in the American and Canadian plains that looked especially promising as testing grounds for this idea. One of those ten areas shone like a particularly promising beacon. This book is the story of that special place. The area called “the Northwest Glaciated Plains” is bounded on its south edge by the jagged line of the Missouri River. (See map 1.) This line describes a strip of glacier-and-flood-carved land that is generally known in eastern Montana as “the Missouri Breaks,” where the flat plain “breaks” to form the river basin.

[Map 1 here]



One need not have GIS software to find the Missouri Breaks. A sense of the history of the general folly of the West will steer you toward this particular place at the heart of the plains and at the heart of this book. The most egregious examples of failed ideas keep cropping up around the Breaks. The tracks of both Roosevelts occur here, literally. In the end, it's as if the whole American enterprise, indeed the whole European enterprise, the notion of our relationship with the land, finally foundered on these very western rocks—and this is one of the cases I will explore in this book—so much so that any attempt to undo the damage, any attempt to rewrite western civilization's founding story, must begin in Phillips County, Montana.

But find the Missouri Breaks first on map 2, zero in on it, just as Haskins's computer did, and understand the promise of this place. Begin at its epicenter in a mostly forgotten but rare bit of wildlife habitat, a million acres that is the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, its very existence a happy accident of history. Add to that a strip of mostly federal land that has already been designated as the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument. Now draw a big, vague, wobbly sort of concentric circle—an oval really—around this core of federal land, a circle that encompasses an additional 2.5 million acres, for a total of about 3.5 million acres. This is the area proposed as the American Prairie Reserve. Notice that the Missouri River bisects this circle. If

[Map 2 here]



*Map 2. The area of the proposed American Prairie Reserve (indicated by shading).
Courtesy of Northern Plains Conservation network.*

one were to canoe from one edge of it to the other, the trek would be the equivalent of traveling from New York City to Washington DC. This is what is meant by large scale.

GIS software allows one to layer the map. An overlay showing property ownership informs us that about fifty to one hundred privately owned ranches occupy a total of approximately 800,000 acres within our 3.5 million-acre circle. The rest is federal land, managed by one of two agencies, either the Bureau of Land Management or the Fish and Wildlife Service; the latter controls the Russell Wildlife Refuge. Both refuge and BLM land are leased for grazing. This is where the opportunity of the American Prairie Reserve lies. By buying those fifty to one hundred ranches, land that sells for maybe \$200 or \$300 an acre, one leverages control of grazing on 3.5 million acres. That is, for about \$250 million—the price of waging war in Iraq for ten days—we create a Yellowstone of the plains.

Three and a half million acres are a big enough area to work as a prairie ecosystem. The size of that area was not arbitrarily chosen but was calculated by biologists Steve Forrest and Curtis Freese, two of the authors of *Ocean of Grass*, as the minimum landscape they think could support enough bison to support, in turn, a viable population of wolves. Biologists now know that we have not succeeded in restoring an ecosystem until we have restored its top-end predators, so wolves must come back. They are absent now, but juvenile wolves routinely travel several hundred miles seeking new territory. Active wolf packs are already that close to the Breaks, so restoring the habitat would bring them home, and this landscape is indeed restorable. Most of its native vegetation remains; the mapping has told us so. It is abused, but simply removing the cows could bring it back to life and would eventually allow the introduction of bison herds big enough to thunder. In fact, the first wild bison already occupy the first purchased ranch as I write this in 2008.

This is a grand idea worth pursuing, especially worth pursuing be-

cause it is so wound up in the larger American story. This is not a story of just conservation; it is the story of all of us.

For a couple of years now I have visited this landscape often. I leave my mountain home in western Montana and drive the six or seven hours to enter the Missouri Breaks by traveling a fifty-five-mile-long gravel road straight south out of the closest town of any consequence, Malta, with a population of twenty-one hundred and falling. I often stop atop what passes for a hill in the short-grass prairie, a tawny landscape of gentle rolls like a cougar's hide. *Gentle*, however, is a seldom-used word in central Montana, a place of 50-below blizzards, 106-degree heat waves, and just enough annual rainfall to keep it from desiccating—at least officially—into desert.

From this hill, one can pan a full 360 degrees of almost straight, unbroken horizon line, treeless and vast as a sea. The only exceptions are the Little Rockies, seen to the northwest, forty to fifty miles away, and the Larb Hills, also forty to fifty miles away but in the opposite direction. Both features are within the project area. Pick the vantage right and the whole sweep will contain not a single building, no structure more significant than a rusting run of three-strand barbed-wire fence strung on steel posts. It's all grass—in the spring of a rare wet year, green native bunch grasses and sagebrush; by fall, grassland grazed hard and flat as a parking lot. "Cow-burned" is the apt and usual description.

This emptiness says "isolation," a misanthrope's paradise that keeps pulling me back, but the sense of emptiness is an illusion, part of the series of illusions this place generates. This, I have come to understand, is a human-formed landscape, an artifact of agriculture, and agriculture, through six thousand years, has evolved into the most environmentally destructive force on the planet. Fitting, then, that this little corner of the globe should now become a center of our struggle to counter that force.

The place may look empty, but it is haunted by a full population

of ghosts. It is haunted by the American story, and a landscape that possesses a history so full and so relevant but is now so vacant is a wonder.

It strikes one at first as bleak, but this too is illusion. Properly understood, it is a landscape of promise and hope.